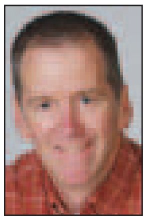
The cornerstone to healthy employee relations

Regardless of whether you're an upper-level manager or a front-line supervisor, one of your primary responsibilities to your employees is to ensure that they are employable. I want to emphasize employable, not employed. Unfortunately, the world occasionally throws curve balls in terms of market swings that require workforce reductions for an organization to survive.



Rick Brimeyer is the president of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm located in Ames. Contact him at www.brimeyerllc.com or by calling (515) 450-8855.

No doubt layoffs are among the most difficult tasks facing any leader. But if you've done a good job of developing your employees, you can at least part with the satisfaction that they'll land on their feet, hopefully with an even better job than the one they're leaving. And the key to developing employees is consistently providing good feedback.

So when was the last time that you provided honest feedback to the employees reporting to you? I'm not talking about the annual form-driven rite called the performance appraisal. Rather, I'm referring to feedback the employee found useful in assessing their current status and future potential within the organization.

OK, so let's start with the obvious. This isn't the easiest part of your job. Oh sure, you can hand out compliments until the cows come home. But what about those times when you're illuminating an employee's blind spot?

Research conducted by Gallup demonstrates a strong relationship between employees who classify themselves as engaged and supervisory feedback. The study concluded supervisors who focus on strengths resulted in the highest rate (61 percent) of engaged employees. Employees who responded that their supervisor focused on weaknesses called themselves engaged at a lower rate (45 percent). Still, it was dramatically higher than the 2 percent of employees who called themselves engaged and claimed that their supervisor ignored them, with a focus on neither strengths nor weaknesses.

So while even bad news is better (much better, in fact) than no news, the best feedback is timely, sincere, well-intentioned and balanced. Scheduling regular one-on-one discussions with each of your employees creates the impending events needed to ensure that feedback occurs as needed, preventing mole hills from escalating into mountains.

I've found that a useful tool for developing a balanced feedback strategy is the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis often used for evaluating an organization during strategic planning.

Let's start with strengths:

- On what types of jobs does the employee consistently deliver solid results?
- What recent situation was particularly well-handled?
- What kinds of work does the employee visibly enjoy?

These should be based on observed behaviors rather than perceptions or hearsay. I typically do not relate feedback from others directly, but rather use it to increase my own sensitivity to the issue to determine if feedback is warranted. This allows me to "own" the feedback.

Weaknesses, like strengths, are primarily backward-looking:

- With what types of tasks does the employee often struggle?
- What recent situation could have been handled better?
- What kinds of work does the employee avoid or appear to not enjoy?

Opportunities are generally forward-looking and involve potentially good changes within the world or the organization:

- What new positions are likely to open up?
- Are new skills needed due to changes in the business or in technology?
- Does an upcoming event offer a chance to try something new?

Threats also tend to be forward-looking, but deal with potentially damaging trends:

- Is the current position at risk due to market or funding trends?
- Are changes in business needs or technology replacing the employee's skills?
- Is a strong competitor emerging?

Getting to know your employees first as unique and valuable people and providing balanced feedback over time will help when the required message is tougher. This still doesn't make it easy, but easier.

Take heart, this is the tough part of managing. But like most things in life, there is a risk and reward relationship. Watching an employee positively respond to your coaching or return to thank you following a new job, either within or outside of the organization, is as good as it gets.

Restaurant traffic loses momentum and expected to stay flat

Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — It's not looking good for the restaurant industry, which struggled through a slow spring and will probably see flat traffic for the next two years.

A mild winter drove more diners to eat out, leading optimistic analysts to predict that the industry was recovering after being slammed in the recession. But those hopes were dashed as the year went on and restaurant visits rose a paltry 1 percent in the spring from a year earlier, according to research firm NPD Group Inc.

NPD analyst Bonnie Riggs cited consumers' "continuing cost-consciousness, still relatively high unemployment and economic uncertainty" as reasons for the industry's disappointing performance.

Originally, NPD expected traffic to grow 1 percent each year in 2012 and 2013; now the group says traffic will be flat.

Some segments, especially fast food, continue to be strong. The quick service sector accounts for 78 percent of restaurant traffic and enjoyed a 2 percent boost in the spring. But visits to family dining establishments and casual spots slid 3 percent and 2 percent, respectively.

Overall, the average diner spent 2 percent more in restaurants compared with a year earlier. Many restaurants cater to young millennial patrons who, although coping with joblessness, still made more than 12 billion visits to restaurants in 2011. That demographic, which spent $73 billion, visits restaurants more than any other age group. And half of millennials, people ages 18 to 34, say they expect their financial situation to improve in the coming year, according to research group Technomic Inc.